

To: Senate Education Committee
From: Debora Steinerman, Vermont Holocaust Memorial
Re: S.87 – An act relating to Holocaust education in public schools.
Date: March 21, 2023

My name is Debora Steinerman. I am the president and co-founder of the Vermont Holocaust Memorial and live in Jeffersonville, Vermont.

Senator Champion and members of the senate education committee –Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of S.87.

I am the fortunate daughter and granddaughter of Holocaust survivors. My mother survived the Holocaust as a teenager hiding under an assumed identity. My father had the foresight to escape Eastern Europe in August of 1939 to join forces to fight against the Nazis in France and then in England. However, I can name over 20 family members that perished in the Holocaust.

As we move further from the end of WWII, we realize that much of today's generation has no connection or even knowledge that the Holocaust occurred. I refer you to the documents and links submitted attesting to the need and interest in Holocaust education. I believe 24 states now have Holocaust education legislation. Vermont is the only state in New England that does not.

The Claims Conference survey of states, completed in 2020, found 65% of Vermonters did not know 6 million Jews were killed, and less than half of adults could correctly answer multiple-choice questions about how Hitler came to power.

Through Holocaust education teachers are empowered to safeguard students who might be exposed to rampant Holocaust misuse, misinformation, and denial. These lessons will increase awareness, enable our students to analyze these challenges, and respect each other's differences.

Thankfully, 79% of Vermonters in the survey I noted believe we must educate so that a genocide like the Holocaust doesn't happen again. Over 900 have signed a student petition calling for Holocaust education in our secondary schools.

It has been a busy 2023 already for our organization. Vermont Holocaust Memorial is a small virtual, volunteer-run, nonprofit, incorporated in 2017 to help share the lessons from the Holocaust throughout the state.

Our speakers appear in Vermont classrooms and assemblies sharing their families' stories of survival in the Holocaust. Right now, I am speaking to you from

Woodstock, where in the next room we are holding our 4th professional development workshop for Vermont educators.

In January, working with the Agency of Education and national Holocaust organizations, we brought the first (virtual) Holocaust Education Week to Vermont schools and communities. It was a difficult task as schools' schedules differ and contacts change often.

An agenda with daily themed lesson plans was offered to help teachers find resources. Holocaust lesson plans are free and easily accessible – I have supplied you with a link to the Week's agenda and information.

There were only 39 registrants for our Zoom presentations, but they represented a potential of approx. 350 sets of eyes in classrooms and in homeschool situations. The subsequent recordings of the presentations, now on our YouTube Channel, have had over 700 views.

The most popular presentations are from speakers who are Holocaust survivors. Unfortunately, the world is losing the last of the survivors at a rapid pace -- and with them their first-hand accounts -- confirming the importance of including accurate factual Holocaust history into our schools' curriculum.

Lessons from the Holocaust can be incorporated within many subjects – Social Studies, English, Civics, Humanities, as well as Science, Foreign Languages, Drama, and even Music and Art.

There was a great deal of media attention to Holocaust Education Week, and this pending legislation. I have submitted a coverage report for your information.

We know Vermont educators are dedicated and overworked. However, Vermont Holocaust Memorial is not an educational organization per se. We are aging children of survivors who supplement classroom lessons with our families' stories of survival: each one unique, miraculous, and thanks to upstanders --and a lot of luck-- we are here to share those accounts.

From our experience, immediate attention to these lessons is required. And not just for the reasons already emphasized. But also because, in many cases, we are invited due to misbehavior, bullying, or the sharing of swastika and Nazi symbols by students. As I'm sure you know, there has been an increase in expressions of antisemitism and white supremacy worldwide, nationally, and even locally in Vermont schools.

I've heard from teachers here at our workshop today how: at least 20% of 8th graders in North Clarendon had never heard of the Holocaust; and that students in Middlebury Union Middle School are fearlessly spewing hate and derogatory comments. These educators are seeking lessons from the past to protect the future.

The Holocaust was a universal tragedy that didn't start with gas chambers. It started with words of hate. State-adopted standards for Holocaust education would ensure supervisory unions and teachers build these vital, free resources into their curriculum.

Your support and passage of this essential education bill will have a lasting positive influence on our children.

Thank you for taking the time to let me speak to you today.

I am available to answer any questions.
